



## **Mount Rainier National Park Climbing and Mountaineering Program Proposed Cost Recovery Fee Increase FAQ's (frequently asked questions)**

### **1. How does the Mount Rainier climbing program serve climbers and why raise the climbing Cost Recovery Fee?**

Mount Rainier National Park is proposing to increase the cost of an annual climbing pass from \$30 to an amount between \$43 and \$58. The fee increase is intended to offset the impacts of 8 years of unfunded cost increases and fund the essential services and programs that directly benefit climbers and the upper mountain.

Mount Rainier's Climbing Program:

- Manages climbing activities to provide a world-class experience
- Registers about 11,000 climbers each year, issues and accounts for climbing passes
- Provides up to date climbing route and safety information
- Keeps weather, climbing, route, and climbing related information updated on a weblog
- Staffs two ranger stations (Paradise and White River) providing climber information, orientations and passes
- Staffs two high camps (Camp Muir and Camp Schurman) and briefs hundreds of climbers each evening during peak season
- Responds to dozens of climbing related searches and rescues; provides emergency medical services
- Maintains toilets daily at the high camps and hauls several thousands of pounds of human waste off the upper mountain to processing facilities
- Manages the "blue bag" program to keep human wastes off the climbing routes
- Maintains and operate high camp facilities and communication systems
- Provides climbing rangers with competencies in core skill areas, including mountaineering, SAR, EMS, Incident Management, and aviation
- Operates a fee collection and point of sale system (credit card machines / iron rangers)
- Monitors the alpine wilderness areas for impacts related to visitor use and climate change

The climbing Cost Recovery Fee pays for the majority of these services plus the program is supplemented by base funding and franchise fees paid by the guide concessionaires. There has been no increase in the climbing Cost Recovery Fee since 2003. The fee charged has not been linked to the consumer price index (CPI) or adjusted for inflation. As a result, gains made from the fee increase 8 years ago have been eroded by inflation and cost increases, leaving the climbing program in even worse financial condition than before the 2003 fee increase.

In addition, an assumption was made in 2002 that demand in climbing would continue to increase at the steady rate seen from 1989-2001, thereby increasing the program's income as more climbing passes were sold each year. This has not turned out to be the case.

This proposed fee increase would be annually adjusted for inflation, better enabling the park to sustain services for climbers and run a safe operation. Fluctuation in the number of climbers would still create

some variability in available funding from year-to-year. However, an initial fee increase to restore services, followed by annual adjustments based on CPI, would provide a firm financial foundation for essential services.

## **2. What new services can be expected as a result of the proposed fee increase?**

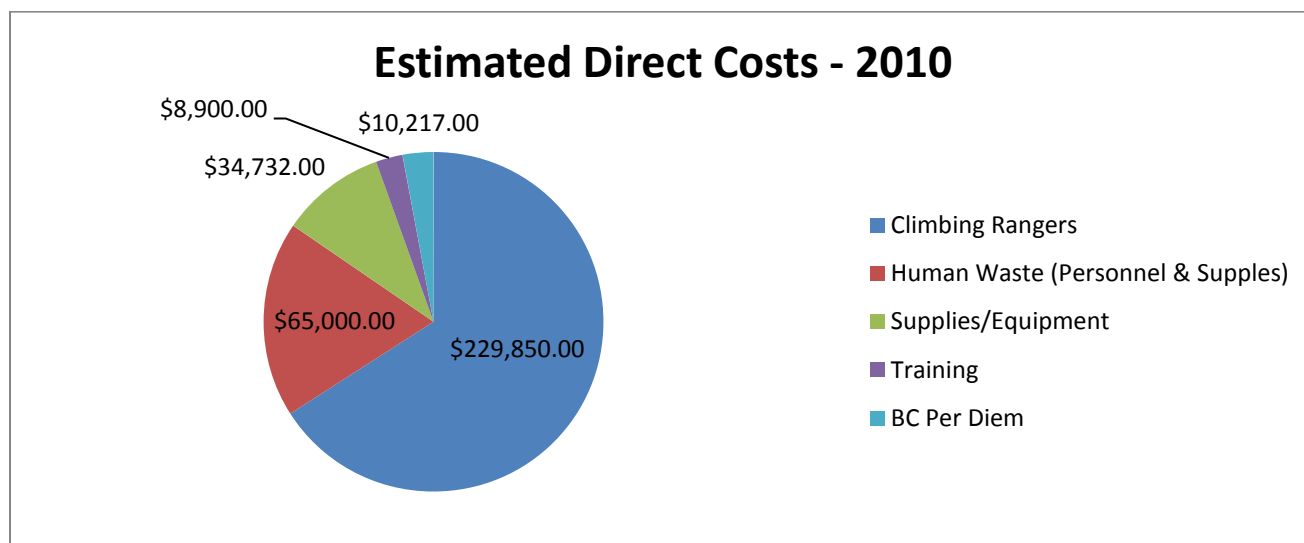
No new services would be added to Mount Rainier's climbing program if the fee increases to \$43. This funding level would reestablish and support a program that meets minimum requirements for essential visitor services, resource protection, public and operational safety.

A fee increase to \$58 would enhance staffing and support new or improved services for climbers:

- More avalanche oriented climbing information in the spring season
- Better SAR organization with guides, Mt. Rescue units, and other volunteer resources
- More consistent climbing blog posts with more routes covered (especially in shoulder seasons)
- Improved self-registration process
- New online services for climbers such as online pass purchase
- Streamlined online solo-climbing application procedures
- Improved public media like orientation videos, detailed route descriptions, and web information
- Improved human waste collection facilities at high camps
- Maintain a minimum staffing level which provides appropriate supervisory oversight and backup contingencies
- More public engagements by leadership staff

## **3. How does the Mount Rainier Climbing Program spend the money it receives from the cost recovery funds and other sources?**

In 2010, Climbing Program funding was allocated and spent as detailed in the chart below. The Program's total budget was about \$348,000. Climbing fee revenue totaled \$273,000. The remaining \$75,000 was non-fee revenue allocated to the program by the park.



**4. What is the authority under which Mount Rainier National Park collects the climbing Cost Recovery Fee?**

Mount Rainier collects the climbing Cost Recovery Fee under 31 USC 9701 (charge for a service –“service or thing of value provided”) and 16 USC Section 3a and OMB Circular A-25 Revised. The program is managed by DOI Part 346 Cost Recovery and NPS Management Policies 8.2.6.1 and DO/RM 53: Special Park Uses. Assistant Secretary, Fish and Wildlife and Parks George T. Frampton Jr. signed the approval memorandum, dated May 31, 1995.

**5. Why is the Mount Rainier climbing program not funded in full with NPS base funding?**

Congress appropriates annual funding for the operation of national park units, including Mount Rainier National Park. This is considered a park's “base funding”. Mount Rainier's base funding is used to fund a broad range of visitor services and related activities. Some of this funding directly supports the climbing program through staff salaries, administrative support, communication systems, utilities and facilities.

Climbing activities are considered Special Park Uses. A Special Park Use is a short term activity that takes place in a park area, and that:

- provides a benefit to an individual, group or organization rather than the public at large;
- requires written authorization and some degree of management control from the NPS in order to protect park resources and the public interest;
- is not prohibited by law or regulation; and
- is neither initiated, sponsored nor conducted by the NPS

NPS Policy (RM-53) directs that the NPS will charge a fee and recover costs for special park use permits unless prohibited by law or Executive Order, or when the proposed use is protected by the First Amendment or involves another right and not a privilege. The NPS will retain funds recovered for the cost incurred in managing a special park use.

Under RM 53, a recoverable cost is defined as, “costs directly attributable to the use. Costs are recoverable when such costs would not have been incurred if the activity did not take place, or, are necessary, in the judgment of the NPS, for the safe completion of the special park use”.

Special use fees may pay for:

- Direct personnel costs
- Material supply costs
- Official travel
- Utilities
- Environmental and cultural compliance
- Vehicles
- Administration
- Management
- Documentation

All Mount Rainier climbing cost recovery fees are placed in an account used solely to provide and support climber services.

**6. Why are park entrance fees not used to pay for the climbing program?**

Entrance fees are collected at Mount Rainier and other parks and federal lands under the authority of the Federal Lands Recreation Enhancement Act (FLREA). This Act directs fees collected to be used to enhance visitor services, including repair, maintenance, and facility enhancement. Typical uses of fee revenues include repairing campgrounds, habitat restoration directly related to wildlife-dependent recreation, fixing boat launches, replacing interpretive displays, providing new restroom facilities and parking. At Mount Rainier, the fees collected at entrance stations have been used to fund the summer Paradise shuttle system, which helps deal with parking shortages at Paradise, chip-sealing the Paradise parking lot, rental of portable toilets for the lower Paradise parking lot to supplement toilets at the Jackson Visitor Center, funding of a permanent comfort station at the lower Paradise lot (2011), numerous trail rehab projects, Paradise meadow revegetation projects, and many others. Many of these projects, while not paying for the park climbing program directly, do benefit those who come to the park to climb the mountain.

### **7. Shouldn't at least some base funding support the climbing program?**

Yes...and it does. The climbing program benefits from base funding in the form of infrastructure, access, services, and administration. This includes operation and maintenance of ranger stations, the Climbing Information Center, Emergency Operations Center, Camp Muir and Camp Schurman structures, and employee housing units. Other funded support services include telecommunications, radio communication infrastructure, dispatch support, electricity, administrative and custodial support. Base funding also supports maintenance of trails and roads that provide access to the park and mountain. The table below presents the major services and support provided by Park base funds, none of which are charged back to the climbing program.

<b>NPS Support of Alpine District Operations</b>
(not associated with climbing fee revenue)

Position / Service	Cost
Climbing Program Manager / District Ranger	\$100,000.00
Chief Ranger (10%)	\$12,000.00
Backcountry Carpenters	\$15,000.00
Backcountry Facilities Manager	\$30,000.00
Concessions Manager	\$20,000.00
Entrance Station Bluebags	\$3,000.00
Wilderness Reservations	\$5,000.00
White River Staffing 4/7th	\$20,000.00
Radio / Telecom Support	\$10,000.00
Other Ranger Station Staffing	\$10,000.00
Miscellaneous Support	\$20,000.00

Total	\$225,000.00
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The Climbing Cost Recovery fees augment the base funding and cover the salaries of the climbing rangers and the field supervisors staffing the upper mountain and the Climbing Information Center, and the salaries and related support costs to manage human waste on the upper mountain.

**8. Do the climbing rangers provide services to visitors other than climbers paying the Cost Recovery Fee?**

Yes. While climbing rangers focus their attention on the upper mountain and the climbing public, they do provide services to all visitors. Climbing rangers provide roadside and low-country EMS, assistance to day and overnight visitors, human waste removal for all who visit high camps, SAR response to all visitors regardless of the activity in which they are involved. While the Climbing Information Center (CIC) focuses its services on climbers, their staff serves every visitor who drops in by providing general park information. The CIC is the only information center open during the early morning hours of 6:00 am to 7:30 am.

The specialized training of climbing rangers, their exceptional fitness, and skills and expertise in the areas of aviation, EMS, SAR, high angle rescue and snow safety (avalanche) make them a highly valued and versatile staff resource for a variety of non-climbing related operations.

**9. Why don't the guide services put more money into the climbing program?**

Mount Rainier's three mountaineering guide services collect the climbing cost recovery fee from each client that is guided on the mountain and these funds are placed directly in the park's climbing Cost Recovery account. The climbing pass fee is the same for guided and independent climbers.

Per the concession contracts, each guide service also places a fixed percentage of their gross receipts into a franchise account. By law, 20% of the franchise fees are sent to Washington, D.C. and are used for national park concession activities Servicewide. 80% of the collected funds remain in the park to be used for concession related needs including, high priority facility repairs and improvements, concession contracting, replacement of major equipment or utility systems, and limited program management and oversight related costs, etc.

In 2010, \$19,000 in franchise fees was used to support the park's mountaineering program services. In 2011, the park will commit between \$50,000 and \$70,000 in franchise fees to these services.

**10. How much money is generated by these guide service franchise fees and why are they not used exclusively to pay for upper mountain projects and the climbing program?**

Mount Rainier National Park receives approximately \$350,000 annually from the combined franchise fees of the three mountaineering concessioners. Franchise fees from all park concessioners (there are 5, total) are pooled and prioritized by park management for use on concession-related needs.

Franchise fees augmented Line Item Construction funding and helped to support the recently completed structural rehabilitation of the historic Paradise Inn, and construction of the new Jackson Memorial Visitor Center. Franchise fees have also been used for projects such as the new roof and painting of the National Park Inn and Paradise Inn electrical upgrades.

Since 2008, franchise fees have funded a climbing ranger to monitor the climbing concessions on the upper mountain. Franchise fees were also used for a major renovation of the Camp Muir Public Shelter. \$54,000 in franchise fees are programmed to support the climbing program in 2011. The park will use franchise fees to complete the Camp Muir Development Concept Plan and then to implement the plan, including the replacement of toilets and other facilities at Camp Muir. The renovation of Camp Muir could include a new public shelter and/or guide-client building, as well as general rock wall and soil stabilization. Over a million dollars in franchise fees would be needed to complete all of these Camp Muir-related projects.

### **11. Shouldn't guide services pay more because they impact the resources more?**

It is true that guide services usually have larger groups than most independent climbers, but in reality these groups do not impact the resources more than independent climbing parties. In fact, the guides and their clients are very closely monitored by climbing rangers and have requirements outlined in their concession contracts to reduce impacts. Monitoring forms are completed by climbing rangers and reviewed by the NPS Concession Manager. Guides are required to have training in "Leave No Trace" alpine skills and to educate their clients in these practices. This has proven effective in minimizing guided climbing related impacts on the mountain...the guides do a good job taking care of the mountain. Climbing rangers interact regularly with guides to provide feedback and maximize resource protection.

When all is taken into account, guided climbers and independent climbers seem to impact the alpine resources about equally and take roughly about the same overall amount of climbing staff time and resources

### **12. Do climbing Cost Recovery Fees pay for search and rescue missions?**

Climbing Cost Recovery Fees **do not pay** for search and rescue (SAR) missions. SAR incidents that exceed \$500 in costs are paid for by a separate, non-park NPS fund. Because most SAR responses quickly exceed the \$500 cost threshold, most Mount Rainier SARs are paid for with this fund source.

Cost Recovery funding plays an essential role in SAR readiness at Mount Rainier by making it possible for the park to have teams of rescue-ready climbing rangers on duty, trained, equipped and available for response to emergencies throughout the course of the climbing season. More importantly, climbing rangers focus much of their energy toward educating and assisting climbers with the goal of preventing SARs, emergencies and tragedies from occurring at all.

### **13. How was the original fee created?**

In 1995, park managers analyzed and determined the basic components of the climbing program. This included the climbing rangers and other staff necessary to provide information and education services, public safety, resource protection, human waste management, and program administration. The cost of providing a functional mountaineering program was estimated at approximately \$100,000. That cost was divided by the number of independent climbers registered that season (6,600) resulting in an approximate cost of \$15 per climber for a single climb or \$25 for an annual climbing pass. Beginning in 2001, all guide service clients were also required to pay the same Cost Recovery Fee. In 2003, the climbing Cost Recovery Fee was raised to \$30 per climber for an annual climbing pass as inflation and other factors created need for additional program funding. The single-trip climbing fee was also eliminated.

### **14. What is the proposed cost of next year's annual climbing pass?**

Between \$43 and \$58...an increase of \$13-18 over the current cost.

In much the same way the original fee was determined by park managers, this fee increase proposal relies on the estimated cost of running the climbing ranger program, divided by the number of climbers expected to register. The proposed budget to run the climbing program for 2011 is between \$512,000 and \$660,000. Looking at current trends, the expectation is approximately 9,650 passes will be sold in

2011. Dividing the overall cost of the program by the number of passes sold results in a pass cost of \$51 to \$67. The park intends to increase the amount of franchise fees supporting the program in 2011, lowering the cost per pass to between \$43 and \$58 per climber per year.

**15. When will there be another cost increase?**

A proposed climbing Cost Recovery Fee in the range of \$43 would support a climbing program that provides the essential visitor and resource protection services, while mitigating risks to park employees living and operating in a high-risk environment. A higher climbing permit fee, up to \$58, would support additional and improved services. Fees would be adjusted beyond 2011 to reflect changes in the consumer price index (CPI), or other methodology, and would be intended to sustain service levels over time.

Changes to the climbing program as a result of changing climatic conditions, demographics, major swings in the popularity of climbing or other effects could occur, however, the proposed fee structure is expected to sustain the program and services into the next decade.

**16. How efficient is the Mount Rainier Climbing Program at managing costs and spending the Cost Recovery Fees?**

The climbing program has always taken a conservative approach to spending. That said, the park offers good value for the cost of a climbing permit. The estimated program cost per climber compares well with those of other NPS park units with substantive climber use, recognizing that costs and other program factors vary widely from park to park and a direct comparison is not possible. The current climbing program (2010) averages out to about \$40 per climb (including the \$30 climbing fee) and the proposed essential program averages out to about \$58 per climb (including the proposed \$43 climbing fee).

**17. Is the park going to charge climbers for crevasse rescue practice on a glacier?**

No. The park has not required climbers to register and pay the Cost Recovery Fee for practicing crevasse rescue techniques on the lower Nisqually Glacier.

**18. What other user fees are charged to the general public at Mount Rainier besides the climbing Cost Recovery Fee?**

There are user fees charged for several other activities including:

spreading of ashes	\$ 25
weddings	\$ 60
frontcountry camping	\$ 12-\$64
backcountry camping reservations	\$ 20
sporting events	varies
commercial filming	\$100 and up

Cost Recovery Fees are charged above and beyond entrance fees for those activities consistently requiring the time and/or services of park personnel that the average visitor does not require.

**19. Why are backcountry campers not charged a fee?**

Overnight backcountry campers are not currently charged a fee other than a reservation fee if they choose to make a reservation. The Park's intention is to institute a user fee for permits for this activity,

and has worked toward this goal for a number of years. This fee would help cover operational costs to manage the park's extensive Wilderness use by overnight campers including maintenance and repair of human waste collection facilities, maintenance of trails and backcountry camps, shelters and trails, management of the wilderness permit system, wilderness patrols to protect public safety and protect park resources, and education of the public on Leave No Trace principles and protecting Wilderness values. These costs are currently covered by park entrance fees, park base funding allocated by Congress, and a number of special project fund sources. Progress toward initiating a Wilderness Permit fee has been delayed in the past due to attempts to coordinate fee structures between Mount Rainier, North Cascades, and Olympic National Parks, and other priorities, such as flood responses, major construction and planning projects that have dominated staff time.

## **20. Why isn't there just one fee that pays for climbing on all of the Northwest's high peaks?**

At this point, the Mount Rainier climbing program is the most complex and costly of the Northwest peaks. This is due to several factors including the sheer number of climber days, the international appeal, the extensive glaciation, the height and difficulty of the mountain, the risk factors, the complexity and number of incidents, the high level of resource protection (e.g. removal of all human waste from the upper mountain) that is necessary to protect the mountain and the quality of the climbing experience. Mount Rainier could join with the managing agencies of the other Northwest peaks, but the cost of such a pass would have to include the full cost of a Mount Rainier pass, in addition to the costs of other passes. This does not seem beneficial to climbers not planning a climb of Mount Rainier.

## **21. Will an increase in fee result in an increase in non-compliance of payment?**

Non-compliance with the climbing Cost Recovery Fee is not currently a problem and the rate of non-compliance did not increase following the last fee increase in 2003. While there will always be occurrences of non-compliance with any requirement, this level is expected to remain negligible. Overall, the climbing Cost Recovery Fee seems to be a non-issue with the great majority of climbers, as virtually no complaints about the fee have been received since it was instituted. The fee is used for programs and services that directly benefit climbers, the climbing experience and the upper mountain.

## **22. Can the fee increase be reduced by reducing services?**

Each of the services provided by the Climbing Program has been studied for possible reduction or removal. Each service currently provided is either consistently requested by climbers, focused on public safety, and necessary to manage public use, human waste and otherwise protect the climbing experience and the upper mountain environment. Additionally, safety risks faced by park employees and volunteers on the mountain dictate the staffing, training, operational and supervision standards that must be met. All of these services, functions, programs and requirements have associated costs.

Route, weather and avalanche conditions are the most requested items at high camps. Due to the unique nature of Mount Rainier's climbing environment, climbing rangers cannot simply repeat general weather reports or condition updates to climbers, but must use their training, experience and knowledge to interpret the available information and formulate reasoned advice or counsel for climbers for each situation.

## **23. Why do experienced climbers, familiar with the mountain and the park's rules and environmental policies, need to register and pay?**



There are several reasons why climbers are required to register for permits: There are limits established in the park's Wilderness Management Plan for the number of overnight users in each zone of the park, including the upper mountain. Carrying capacities protect resources and the quality of the visitor's experience. This is the reason EVERY person backcountry camping within the park (backpacker or climber) must register for their overnight trip.

Experienced or not, most everyone uses the toilet facilities at high camps and/or the blue bag system on the upper mountain. Park and agency plans and policy dictate that all human waste will be removed from the upper mountain. There is a significant cost to this program, and the Cost Recovery Fee pays for it.

Accidents and medical problems happen to even the most experienced climbers. While rescue costs are not paid out of the Cost Recovery Fees, staffing the mountain with teams of rescue-ready climbing rangers, trained and available for emergencies is. While a climber might be OK saying, "I don't want anyone to come help if I am hurt", their family and friends see it differently. The park has a duty to act when a visitor is injured or sick.

**24. Could there be graduated fees so that climbers pay for only the services they use? Or perhaps pay less for climbing more remote routes with fewer services?**

Such a fee schedule adds a good deal of complexity to an otherwise easy-to-understand fee structure. Many of the comments received during the 2002 fee proposal public meetings emphasized the desire to have a simple fee structure. The park's response to this recommendation was to implement the flat fee for an annual pass that is now in place.

Additionally, climbing ranger services for the most experienced climbers are not considerably different from those provided to a novice (see previous question).

**25. Are services afforded climbers really more expensive than services afforded the average park visitor?**

Yes. The following are some of the climber services not provided to average park visitors:

- maintaining specialized high-altitude toilets daily and flying human waste from high camps
- providing and disposing of blue bags
- staffing remote high camps with knowledgeable and skilled rangers to assist climbers and respond to incidents
- providing an emergency medical services capability on the upper mountain
- supplying high camps with emergency and communications gear
- conducting summit patrols to assess route conditions, monitor use and resource impacts
- provide timely information to climbers at high camps, ranger stations and on the blog
- registering every climber, providing safety, weather, route planning and orientation information

**26. Other Cascade peaks have either a small climbing program or no climbing programs at all. Why does Mount Rainier National Park need to have fully staffed (and more costly) climbing program?**

Mount Rainier is the tallest, most massive and most glaciated peak in the Cascades. The number of climber days annually for summit climbers is more than twice that of any other large Cascade peak. On average, climbs of Mount Rainier take three days. With over 10,000 climbers per year on the mountain,

that represents about 30,000 visitor use days. That's a lot of users and use on the upper mountain, concentrated largely over a three month period, in an alpine environment that is readily impacted and degraded.

This use is managed - through use limits, regulations, permit requirements, information, education, on-site staffing of the high camps, maintenance of toilet facilities and the blue bag system - to protect the environment and the world-class qualities of the Mount Rainier climbing experience. The climbing routes and camps are clean, and a high quality visitor experience persists, because use is deliberately managed. This management, in turn, requires a combination of skilled and experienced staff and volunteers before, during and after the primary climbing season.

Moreover, because the NPS has exclusive jurisdiction over Mount Rainier National Park it cannot delegate its management responsibilities (including search and rescue) to another entity.

Over 100,000 people have attempted summit climbs of Mt. Rainier in the last 10 years!

## **27. Can paid climbing rangers be replaced with volunteers?**

Never entirely. Mount Rainier relies heavily on volunteers to operate the park and incorporates 3-6 volunteers in its climbing program each year. Volunteer contributions to the climbing program are invaluable. However, experience has taught – in the hardest way possible at Mount Rainier – that volunteers must also work alongside and be led by a staff of professional, paid climbing rangers with the specialized skills, knowledge and experience needed in the high risk environment of the upper mountain.

Volunteers are generally a short-term resource with high turnover. Volunteering for some is an avenue to developing the experience needed to compete for a paid position. To retain rangers with the skills, training, knowledge and experience needed at Mount Rainier – and to keep good people coming back - they must be paid.

## **28. What skills are required of Mount Rainier climbing rangers?**

Here's a listing of climbing ranger knowledge, skills and abilities:

- Climbing/Mountaineering Skills
- Rope Rescue
- Aviation
- Emergency Medical Technician-B
- Avalanche Forecasting
- Fee Collection
- Resource Management/Leave No Trace Best Practices
- Human Waste Management
- Risk Management
- Incident Management
- Mountain Weather Forecasting
- Excellent interpersonal and communications skills
- Ranger Station Operations

Certifications and continuing education are required in several of these areas.